



Redefining love: Engaging the Johannine and Akan concepts of love through dialogic hermeneutics



Authors:


Godibert K. Gharbin¹ 
Ernest van Eck^{1,2} 

Affiliations:

¹Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Religion and Theology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of New Testament, Knox College, Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Research Project Registration:

Project Leader: Ernest van Eck 

Project Number: 2400030

Description:

The author/s are participating in the research project 'Africa Platform for NT Scholars', directed by Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck, Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria

Corresponding author:

Godibert Gharbin,
kelly.godibert@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 22 July 2023

Accepted: 07 Sept. 2023

Published: 22 Dec. 2023

How to cite this article:

Gharbin, G.K. & Van Eck, E., 2023, 'Redefining love: Engaging the Johannine and Akan concepts of love through dialogic hermeneutics', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(4), a9275. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i4.9275>

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Both the Johannine and Akan cultures are described in scholarly literature as collectivistic communities that value love as a communal value. Nonetheless, a scholarly analysis of the Akan concept reveals that Akan proverbial tradition promotes love motivated by the expectation of reciprocation. Thus, the article aimed to provide a biblical response to these challenges for Akan Christians, who hold love as both a traditional and theological value. Consequently, the study employed Gatti's dialogic hermeneutics because it encourages engagement between text and culture, viewing them as dialogue partners from which a call to action emanates directed at the interpreter's context. Even though the Akan concept relates love to sacrifice, forgiveness and reciprocity, it promotes conditional love, thereby diminishing its concept of love-motivated sacrifices and reciprocity. By incarnating the concept of love that Jesus promotes and embodies in John, Akan Christians can establish a culture that reflects the community of God, proscribing conditional love and prescribing utmost and greater love – godly selfless and reciprocal love. In addition, it makes love the substratum of functional unity and interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, it makes love a divine command for the community of believers.

Contribution: This article engages the Johannine and the Akan ideations of love through dialogic hermeneutics and, as such, contributes to African biblical hermeneutics and the ongoing discussions on the inculturation of the New Testament within the African context.

Keywords: love; inculturation; dialogic hermeneutics; reciprocal love; sacrificial love; love command.

Introduction

The 1960s marked the beginning of a new epoch for African biblical hermeneutics triggering the desire to develop new hermeneutical models to enculturate the biblical text, culminating in an inundation of idiosyncratic applications of inculturation as a hermeneutical approach (cf. Gatti 2017:46–47; Ossom-Batsa 2007:91–92). Even though scholars have labelled it uniquely,¹ their goal is the contextualisation of the biblical message in contemporary African culture. For instance, Ukpong (1995:6) regards inculturation as an 'interactive engagement between the biblical text and a particular contemporary sociocultural issue'. Loba-Mkole (2008:1347–1359) also considers inculturation as the 'constructive dialogue between an original biblical culture and a receptive audience'. In cognisance of the application of inculturation on various distinct levels, this study adheres to the dialogic hermeneutics of Gatti (2017).²

Dialogic hermeneutics is a method of inculturation that considers the interpretative process as a dialogue between two cultural worlds (the text and culture), beginning with the text's cultural affinity (Gatti 2017:48). Thus, it regards the text and culture as partners in a dialogue from which a call to action arises and is addressed to the interpreter's context (Gatti 2017:48). Consequently, the Akan and the Gospel of John were selected as the two cultural contexts for

1. For instance, though Ossom-Batsa (2007) and Gatti (2017) have a similar approach to inculturation that follows a tripartite frame of interpretation developed by the former, he refers to his method as the communicative approach, whereas Gatti (2017) prefers the term 'dialogic hermeneutics'. There is also inculturation biblical hermeneutic by Ukpong (1995:6), intercultural exegesis by Loba-Mkole (2008), and African biblical hermeneutic by Nyiawung (2013).

2. In her work, Gatti (2017) elucidates that the dialogic approach to interpretation is 'respectful of both the biblical text and the receiving culture. Text and culture are placed "face to face" so that from their dialogue a call to action may arise addressed to the community of believers'.

this study based on their cultural affinity, which legitimises and enriches the dialogue between the two cultures. One of these is their emphasis on communalistic values, which includes an appreciation of love (cf. Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:1–8; Gyekye 1996:70; Opoku 1997:77; Jn 13:34). Therefore, the study aims at engaging them in dialogic hermeneutics.

This necessitates an informed understanding of the love ideation in both contexts. Hence, the study is divided into three sections: the first part examines love in Akan epistemology; the second is an analysis of the love ideation in John; and the third is the dialogue between the two cultural worlds (dialogic hermeneutics).

Love in Akan epistemology

In the epistemology of the Akans, there are different categories of love. Familial love, sexual love and brotherly love are a few examples (Ackah 1988:56–57; Opoku 1997:77–78). Familial love is the natural love between parents and children (Opoku 1997:77–78). Generally, the Akans employ the mother metaphor to explicate their concept of parental love. Employing proverbs such as *'ɔbaatan na onim nea ne ba bedi'* ('It is the mother who knows what her children will eat') and *'Tintimme se obewe ɔbo a, ɔne Sekyere Amprofiri'* (If Tintimme [mother locust] says she will eat a stone, she shares it with her little one [Sekyere Amprofiri]), the Akans opine that love – motherly or parental love – is the substratum of parental sacrifices (Opoku 1997:78).

Another expression of familial love in the Akan cultural world is sexual love, that is, love between spouses: husband (a man) and wife (a woman). In the Akan conceptual scheme, this love is not only sexual but also complete devotion to each other. This is the explanation of the proverb *'ɔdɔ ye owu'* ['love is death'] (Opoku 1997:77; cf. Ackah 1988:57).

Furthermore, brotherly love is the biggest form of familial love. Unlike the first two, it widens the scope to include everyone in the community and beyond. For the Akan, the concept of brotherhood extends beyond blood ties (Gyekye 1996:26, 28). To them, humanity has no boundaries. They express this idea in the adage, *'nnipa nua ne nipa'* ['Man's brother is a man'] (Gyekye 1996:28). Therefore, brotherly love is the natural affection for members of the human community (Ackah 1988:56–57).

It is pertinent to note that the varied expressions of love in the Akan culture also rest on the place of love in their conceptual scheme: it is thought to be the greatest virtue (Gyekye 1996:70; Opoku 1997:77). Hence the proverb, *'ɔdɔ senee, bribiara ansen bio'* [When charity comes and passes by, nothing comes after] (Gyekye 1996:70; Opoku 1997:77).

Because there are many ways to show love in the Akan culture, a sign of 'familial' or brotherly love could be indicative of genuineness or spuriousness. Thus, some Akan proverbs show what they consider to be the signs of genuine and fake love. One of the signs of spurious love is that it is financially motivated. This is captured in proverbs that expose the presence, perils and inauthenticity of wealth-motivated love in the Akan culture. An example of the latter is *'ɔdɔ biara a wɔdi sika tɔ no, sika tumi see no'* ['the love that money buys can also be destroyed by money'] (cf. Opoku 1997:77).

Conversely, the above proverb demonstrates that in the Akan philosophy of love, one of the marks of genuine (brotherly) love is that it is not money-induced. Another proverb confirms this idea: *'ɔdɔ wonni no sika'* ['true love is not motivated by wealth'] (cf. Opoku 1997:77). The criticality of this view emanates from the Akan philosophy of the dignity of the human being, which advocates for the need to value people above wealth or material possessions (cf. Appiah, Appiah & Agyeman-Duah 2007:201; Gyekye 1996:190–191; Opoku 1997:12). The following are a few examples: *'onipa na ehia; mefre sika a, sika nnye me so; mefre ntama a ntama nnye me so'* [It is a human being that counts; I call upon gold, it answers not; I call upon cloth, it answers not] (Gyekye 1996:190; Opoku 1997:10); *'onipa ye fe sen sika'* ['a human being is more beautiful than gold or money'] (Gyekye 1996:25; Opoku 1997:12), and *'onipa ho hia sene sika'* ['man is more important than money'] (Appiah et al. 2007:201). Thus, when love is motivated by wealth, it reverses the order and makes money more important than a human being. Therefore, such love cannot be genuine because wealth is the focus, not people.

Furthermore, one of the preponderant characteristics of genuine love espoused in Akan proverbs is that it impels sacrificial giving (Ackah 1988:29, 56–57; cf. Opoku 1997:78). One of these adages, for instance, is, *'ɔdɔ nti na Esiamma kaw nam mono mu'* ['It is out of love that Esiamma bit a raw fish into two'] (Ackah 1988:29, 56–57; cf. Opoku 1997:78). The proverb portrays Esiamma dividing raw fish with her teeth out of love, despite the risk of being injured by bones. Understanding the etymology of the name further clarifies the meaning of the proverb. Esiamma can be translated literally as Esi who does not give (*amma*). Thus, it means a parsimonious or tight-fisted person called Esi (Ackah 1988:29; Opoku 1997:78). As such, the act reveals how brotherly love motivates even stingy people to demonstrate what is uncharacteristic of their nature: giving sacrificially.

Similarly, visiting each other is regarded as a love-motivated sacrifice. This is the significance of the proverb: *'asu a edɔ wo na eko w'ahina mu'* ['It is the river that loves you that enters your drinking pot'] (Opoku 1997:77). The Akans view visiting people as a sacrificial activity, especially if they live far away, because the visitor sacrifices time, energy, and sometimes resources for this. Thus, visitors and residents refer to these places in the local parlance as *'dɔ me a bra'* [if you love me, come or visit] to reflect the above.

Moreover, the Akans consider the capacity to forgive to be one of the characteristics of love. One proverb that elucidates this notion is the idiom ‘*ɔbaapefoɔ nye anem*’ [‘A person who loves his woman does not bear grudges against her’] (Appiah et al. 2007:19). Even though the content of the proverb is redolent of a romantic relationship, it applies to all kinds of human relationships. The proverb means that ‘people excuse those they love’. Thus, for the Akans, love is forgiving or makes forgiving easier.

Additionally, some Akan proverbs reveal that the Akans believe that all genuine forms of love must be reciprocal. Hence, the Akans have a proverb that goes as follows: ‘*obi do wo a, do no bi*’ [‘If someone loves you, love him in return’] (Opoku 1997:77). The maxim implies that for the Akan, love must be given and received. Thus, the one who loves expects reciprocation. And the recipient must understand the responsibility that accompanies it: the expectation of reciprocity.

The love ideation in John

It is expedient for any academic analysis of the idea of love in John to start with understanding how the Father and the Son relate to each other in the Gospel. The reason for this is that, in John, love as a communal value originates from the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son (cf. Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:1–8). Additionally, the believing community exists to imitate the community of God. Moreover, love flows from the Divine to the believing community (cf. Bauckham 2015:31–32). As a result, it is prudent to trace its thematic development back to the eternal community.

The discussions on the love relationship in the ideal community concentrate on how Jesus and the Father relate, describing their union primarily as a loving relationship (cf. Jn 3:35; Jn 5:20; Jn 10:17; Jn 14:31; Jn 15:9–10; Jn 17:23, 24; 26). In this relationship, Ridderbos (1997:519) correctly notes that the Father is the source and energy of love. Thus, John defines the Father’s love as the substratum of his actions, employing two verbs: ‘to give’ (δίδωμι) and ‘to show’ (δείκνυμι) (cf. Jn 3:16, 35; Jn 17). The narrative traces the incarnation of the Logos to the Father’s act of giving (Jn 3:16). Love is also the reason for putting all things into the hands of the Son (Jn 3:35; Jn 13:3; cf. Jn 17:7). Also in the farewell prayer, Jesus enumerates many things the Father gave him: authority (Jn 17:2), believers (Jn 17:2, 6, 9, 24), words (Jn 17:8), the divine name (Jn 17:11–12) and glory (Jn 17:22, 24). The application and interconnectedness of love and giving characterise giving as a natural component of love. It distinguishes the loving community as a society where giving is a lifestyle. To love, according to John, is ‘to do’.

Furthermore, John relates love to the verb δείκνυμι, another love-motivated act of the Father (Jn 5:20). The verb is crucial because of its connection to the Father and Son’s functional unity. Jesus proclaims that his works are the result of paternal love; he only accomplishes or imitates what the Father does and demonstrates to him out of love (Jn 5:19–20). In the

narrative context, ἔργα refers to judgement and life-giving prerogatives (Jn 5:20–30; Harris 2015:113; Köstenberger 2004:183). However, in John, Jesus employs ἔργα to refer to his vocation and everything he does (Jn 4:34; Jn 5:36; Jn 17:4). By extension, what the Father reveals to the Son encompasses the preceding, and as the obedient Son, Jesus does what he observes the Father doing (Jn 5:19). The adverb ὁμοίως [likewise] indicates the identity of *action* (functional unity), culminating in perfect parallelism between the Father and the Son (Jn 5:19; Carson 1991:252; Vincent 2009:135). In other words, it unites the functions so that the product is both the work of the Father and the Son (Barrett 1978:260; Ngewa 2003:88). Thus, the connection established between love and the verbs demonstrates that in God’s community, love initiates, undergirds, underpins and contributes to the functional unity of its members (cf. Jn 5:19–20).

Also, while the Father is the source and energy of love, the Son returns the Father’s love, creating an atmosphere of mutual love. John discusses the reciprocity of love between the Father and Jesus in his prologue and narrative (cf. Jn 1:1–2, 18; Jn 14:31). The prologue commences with the notion that the Logos enjoys communion and intimacy with God (Harris 2015:18; Vincent 2009:34) and ends with the indication that the Son εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς (who is in the bosom of the Father), an expression that depicts mutual love (Carson 1991:134). The narrative reiterates this idea, revealing Jesus’ love for the Father and demonstrating his commitment to the love relationship through perfect obedience to his commands out of love (Jn 14:31; Jn 15:9–10; Köstenberger 2004:456). Through these, he affirms the reciprocity of love discussed in the prologue.

Additionally, John casts love as an eternal and communal value in the community of God. The eternity of the reciprocity of love is implicit in the grammar and theology of John. The prologue sets the discussions in the context of eternity, employing the imperfect tense to establish that the relationship between the Son and the Father predates the creation (Jn 1:1–2; cf. Köstenberger 2004:25, 115; Ngewa 2003:11). The prologue situates the loving relationship that the community members enjoy in this milieu through the Greek preposition (πρὸς) and asserts that the Son is in the bosom of the Father (Jn 1:1–2, 18). It means that the Son enjoys an unparalleled and timeless intimacy with the Father (Jn 1:1–2, 18; Köstenberger 2004:49; Vincent 2009:60). In the farewell prayer, Jesus affirms the eternalness of the Father’s love by declaring that it precedes the foundation of the world (Jn 17:24). Thus, the clues from the prologue and narrative suggest that John ties the community’s existence to the eternal and reciprocal love, thereby rendering them coeternal and inextricable.

Furthermore, Jesus’ love for the believing community replicates what he enjoys with the Father. Therefore, it shares similarities with the attributes of the quintessential community (Jn 15:9–10; cf. Carson 1991:520; Köstenberger 2004:456). Akin to the divine model, the relationship between Jesus and the believing community portrays an inextricable

connection between love, giving and showing (Jn 15:13–15; cf. Jn 17:26). It is important to note, however, that even though the two expressions (δίδωμι and δείκνυμι) are not used explicitly, the narrative maintains their significance: showing and giving out of love.

The farewell discourse reveals two loving acts of Jesus: offering his life for the disciples and elevating their status (Jn 15:13–15; cf. Jn 17:26). The narrator attributes his decision to sacrifice his life for his friends to love, which he labels ‘greater love’ (Jn 15:13; cf. Carson 1991:521–522; Harris 2015:269). The ultimate sacrifice that two friends can make is to lay down their lives for one another (Ridderbos 1997:520). Thus, by establishing this as the standard and exemplifying it through his death, Jesus defines the nature of love that is expected from his friends.

Moreover, John ties love to the elevated status of the believers. From the inception of the gathering of the community of faith, John describes the members as disciples of Jesus. However, in the farewell address, the people who were hitherto classified disciples become friends of Jesus (Jn 15:13–16; Brodie 1993:483; Köstenberger 2004:459). The change of identity to friends is a more elevated status (Köstenberger 2004:459). He gives them this new status as an act of love (Brodie 1993:483; Keener 2003:911).

In the context of this elevated status or friendship is transparency (or *showing*). The reader discovers that the new relationship occasions the transmission of heavenly information to the believing community, just as the narrative makes the intimate relationship in the ideal community a prerequisite for the transparent disposition of the Father towards the Son (Carson 1991:522–523; Harris 2015:270). Jesus, just like the Father, withholds nothing from his friends but shares with them everything he heard from the Father (Jn 15:15; Jn 17:26).

Most importantly, the narrative progression of the theme indicates that the goal of Jesus’ demonstration of love to the believing community was to prepare them to imbibe the culture of his community (cf. Jn 1:18). It is evident in the love commandment issued to the disciples (cf. Jn 13:34; Jn 15:9, 12, 17). Jesus commands the believing community to remain or abide in his love (Jn 15:9). In the theology of John, this refers to the love of the Father; love originates from the Father (cf. Jn 15:9; Ridderbos 1997:519). Moreover, Jesus affirms this, making the love of his Father the model of what he demonstrates: he loves just as the Father loves (Jn 15:9). Thus, the imperative implies continuing the chain of love initiated by the Father and replicated by the Son (cf. Jn 15:9). Hence, it furnishes us with a hermeneutical key for understanding the import of the love command: we must interpret it through the prism of the eternal relationship because Jesus makes his command to the believers analogous to his obedience to the commandments of the Father (cf. Jn 15:10). In the familial relationship, Jesus keeps the commands of the Father out of love (Köstenberger 2004:456; cf. Harris 2015:269). Thus, the

ramification for the disciples is to remain in Jesus’ love by obeying his commands as an expression of love, not by compulsion, because obedience based on coercion is not love (Carson 1991:520; Ridderbos 1997:519). Conversely, love devoid of adherence to commands is uncharacteristic of the community of God because the two are mutually dependent (Barrett 1978:476).

Additionally, the command clarifies the character of love expected from the believing community. Remaining in the love of Jesus is to love one another as he has loved them (Jn 13:34; Jn 15:9, 12, 17). The Greek word καθώς has a comparative and causative force (Harris 2015:293). However, in the context of love, Jesus employs it preponderantly to compare the quintessential and believing communities, making love in the former the paradigm for the latter (cf. Jn 13:34; Jn 15:9–12; Jn 17:11). Thus, loving one another as he has loved them means exemplifying what is comparable or analogous to the ideal model Jesus promotes to the believing community. The analogy with its attendant responsibilities allows believers to perceive a new portrait of love.

Dialogic hermeneutics between the Johannine and Akan concepts

Through dialogic hermeneutics, this section treats the two cultural worlds as partners in a dialogue, examining how the Akan cultural perspective enriches the understanding of the Johannine idea of love and allows the call to action in John to be addressed to the Akan cultural context.

One of the benefits of love in the Akan conceptual framework for Akan believers who read John is that it enhances their comprehension of the Johannine description of love. For example, it assists Akan Christians in comprehending crucial aspects of love in this gospel, such as the connection between love and sacrifice (cf. Harris 2015:269; Opoku 1997:77). Additionally, it enables them to comprehend the relationship between love and reciprocity (cf. Opoku 1997:77). In addition, the Akan attributes of love, such as forgiveness and sacrificial visits, attribute communalism-enhancing qualities to love (Appiah et al. 2007:19; Opoku 1997:77). This clarifies why Jesus makes love an imperative and the foundation of John’s communalism. Therefore, their prior comprehension of love can serve as a point of departure and a prism for analysing the Johannine concept of love.

Nonetheless, the Akan depiction of love contains flaws. One of these is how brotherly love is depicted as the cause of selfless giving. For instance, the proverb ‘Esiamma bit a raw fish in half out of love’ suggests that love can motivate a miserly individual to give selflessly. However, it is difficult to reconcile frugality with love-motivated or selfless giving, as misers are naturally selfish and uncharitable, making stinginess and sacrificial giving contradictory. Therefore, sacrifices from the parsimonious may be motivated by the expectation of reciprocity rather than by brotherly love.

Furthermore, the Akan concept promotes conditional love. For instance, the adage on reciprocal love (if someone loves you) makes the Akan love conditional because it obliges an individual to reciprocate love only upon reception. It is noteworthy because many consider the Akans a communalistic society and love as their greatest virtue (Gyekye 1996:70; Opoku 1997:77). Therefore, it is legitimate to expect that demonstrating love would not be predicated on conditionalities. Enjoining community members to reciprocate love on the condition that they receive it has further consequences. Members will only show love to those who love them. Additionally, they would not be obliged to initiate love. Given that love in this context is predicated upon reception, the absence of initiation creates the possibility of a society where encountering love is not a certainty.

Moreover, between wealth and love, Akan proverbs blur the line concerning what is more important. Proverbs, talking about how important money and love are, say the same thing about both of them. Akans say, 'When charity comes and passes by, nothing comes after' (Gyekye 1996:70; Opoku 1997:77). Similarly, 'when wealth comes and passes by, nothing comes after' (Gyekye 1996:98–99). The ramification is that, whereas wealth is the ultimate possession, love is the greatest virtue in Akan thought (Gyekye 1996:70; Opoku 1997:77). The materialistic elements in the Akan culture and the recognition of wealth-impelled love make it legitimate to think of the difficulty of striking a balance when wealth is involved.

Given these problems, Akan Christians can build a culture that reflects their mission as a community of God by adopting the idea of love that Jesus epitomises and promotes in John. John captures this concept in the love imperative (cf. Jn 13:34; Jn 15:9, 12, 17). In the love commandment, one of the attributes that John invites Akan Christians to embody is mutual love (cf. Köstenberger 2004:457; Carson 1991:521; Ridderbos 1997:520). It evokes the reciprocity of love in the community of God (cf. Jn 1:1–2, 18; Jn 14:31). In the divine portrait, community members love and receive love in return. Thus, the command to mirror the eternal paradigm mandates all members to love and be loved. It is also pertinent to note that the paradigm of reciprocity in love does not promote conditional love. Jesus neither enjoins believers to demonstrate love as a response to the reception of love nor gives specific conditions to warrant it. He only commands everyone to love just as he loves (Jn 13:34; Jn 15:12, 17). Therefore, the community members must exhibit love out of obedience to the divine imperative, whether they enjoy reciprocation of love or not. The implication is that John invites Akan believers to incarnate the love of Christ in their cultural expression or become an extension of his humanity.

In contrast to the Akan community, where human inadequacy is the cause of unity (cf. Gyekye 1996:37, 45), John challenges Akans to make love the foundation and necessary factor of functional unity (analogous to the divine community). Love promotes the degree of openness required for a community of actions, as embodied by the community of God (cf. Jn 5:19–20).

Because the divine community materialised its concept through functional unity, its continuation is dependent on the collaborative efforts of the witnesses. The advancement of incarnating God's concept of community requires the participation of a community of witnesses who adhere to the fundamental principle of Christian expansion by repeatedly testifying about Jesus (cf. Jn 15:27; Carson 1991:159; Talbert 2005:86). It is a position that affords them the opportunity to participate in a mission initiated and sustained by the functional unity of God's community, thereby making this quality essential to its continuation (Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:7).

Beyond this, the narrative reveals that the character of the interpersonal relationships demonstrated by community members should reflect Jesus' example because their mission demands replicating him. John states that Jesus loves his own (Jn 13:1). The phrase ('his own') evokes what Jesus reveals in the Good Shepherd metaphor about his relationship with his disciples (Jn 10:1–21). Here, Jesus identifies them as his (own) sheep (Jn 10:3). By evoking this concept, John employs the expression 'his own' as a designation for the disciples of Jesus as the objects of his love (Harris 2015:242; Köstenberger 2004:395; Kruse 2003:279). Loving his own makes it the shared responsibility of Akan readers to love their own, something that the love command reiterates (Jn 10:1–21; cf. Jn 13:34–35; 15:12, 17).

Another issue revealed in this example is the extent of his love and its reverberations on the community of God (cf. Jn 13:1). The theological import of this love for the believers lies in the interpretation of the Greek phrase εἰς τέλος, which can be interpreted either as an adverbial or temporal clause (Carson 1991:460–461; Harris 2015:242; Kruse 2003:279). If considered adverbially, the focus is on the intensity of love, that is, uttermost love (Harris 2015:242; Keener 2003:899; Kruse 2003:279). When taken temporally, the communicative force is that Jesus loved them to the end of his life (Carson 1991:460–461; Harris 2015:242; Keener 2003:899; Kruse 2003:279). In his relationship with the disciples, Jesus demonstrated both: he loved to the uttermost and to the end of his life (Köstenberger 2004:402; Kruse 2003:279). Jesus not only loved until the end of his life, but also died because of it. He sacrificed his life for love. Uttermost love is sacrificial love, epitomised in the Good Shepherd laying down his life for his sheep or as a man for his friends (Jn 10:11, 15:13).

In sum, John urges Akan Christians to revise their understanding of selfless love and sacrifices made from love. Conditional love must be substituted by greater love, entailing loving the members of the community to the very end and expressing reciprocal sacrificial love (Barrett 1978:476; Carson 1991:521–522). In this context, the ultimate sacrifice (sacrificing themselves for each other) is in view, from which all other sacrifices derive. By doing so, they embody the culture of the ultimate community, in which sacrifice and giving are the defining characteristics. In addition, their obedience to the command identifies them as his friends (cf. Jn 15:14; Carson 1991:522; Harris 2015:269) and

evokes the image of Jesus' selfless love for sinful humanity (cf. Jn 13:35; Ridderbos 1997:477).

Conclusion

Given the cultural similarity between the Johannine and Akan conceptions of love and the flaws in the Akan concept, the purpose of this study was to provide a biblical response to the problem. The findings indicate that the propagation of conditional love in the Akan conceptual scheme casts doubt on some of the Akan concept's characteristics, including sacrifice and reciprocity. It is proposed that Akan Christians should strive to become the extension of Jesus' humanity. It entails embodying the concept of love that Jesus promulgates and exemplifies in John, that is, being obedient to the divine imperative by demonstrating utmost and greater love – divine sacrificial and reciprocal love. Finally, it necessitates making love the foundational principle of interpersonal relationships and the functional unity of God's community.

Acknowledgements

This article presents reworked version of aspects of the first author's PhD dissertation, titled 'The concept of community in the Johannine gospel', at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa, with supervisor Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck and co-supervisor, Dr Han Janse van Rensburg, received April 2023, available here: <https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/88915>.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

G.K.G. and E.V.E. were involved in the conceptualisation, writing of the original draft, review and editing. E.V.E. was also responsible for supervision.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards of research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Ackah, C.A., 1988, *Akan ethics: A study of the moral ideas and the moral behaviour of the Akan tribes of Ghana*, Ghana Universities Press, Accra.
- Appiah, P., Appiah, K.A. & Agyeman-Duah, I., 2007, *Bu me be: Proverbs of the Akans*, Ayeibia Clarke, Oxfordshire.
- Barrett, C.K., 1978, *The gospel according to St. John: An introduction with commentary and notes on the Greek text*, 2nd edn., Westminster John Knox Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Bauckham, R., 2015, *Gospel of glory: Major themes in Johannine theology*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Brodie, T.L., 1993, *The gospel according to John: A literary and theological commentary*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Carson, D.A., 1991, *The gospel according to John*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Gatti, N., 2017, 'Toward a dialogic hermeneutics: Reading Genesis 4:1–16 with Akan eyes', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 39, 46–67. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18712207-12341344>
- Gharbin, G.K. & Van Eck, E., 2022, 'The Johannine prologue: A hermeneutical key to the community theme', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1), a2621. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2621>
- Gyekye, K., 1996, *African cultural values: An introduction*, Sankofa Publishing Company, Accra.
- Harris M.J., 2015, 'John', in A.J. Köstenberger & R.W. Yarbrough (eds.), *Exegetical guide to the Greek New Testament*, pp. 3–353, B&H Academic, Nashville.
- Keener, C.S., 2003, *The gospel of John: A commentary*, vol. 1, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Köstenberger, A.J., 2004, *John*, BECNT, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Kruse, C.G., 2003, *The gospel according to John: An introduction and commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Loba-Mkole, J.C., 2008, 'Rise of intercultural biblical exegesis in Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 64(3), 1348–1364. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v64i3.77>
- Ngewa, S.M., 2003, *The gospel of John*, 1st edn., Evangel Publishing House, Nairobi.
- Nyiwang, M.D., 2013, 'Contextualising biblical exegesis: What is the African biblical hermeneutic approach?', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69(1), 2011. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2011>
- Opoku, K.A., 1997, *Hearing and keeping: Akan proverbs*, vol. 2, Asempa Publishers, Accra.
- Ossom-Batsa, G., 2007, 'African interpretation of the Bible in communicative perspective', *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 2, 91–104.
- Ridderbos, H., 1997, *The gospel of John*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Talbert, C.H., 2005, *Reading John: A literary and theological commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine epistles*, rev. edn., Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., Macon, GA.
- Ukpong, J.S., 1995, 'Rereading the Bible with African eyes: Inculturation and hermeneutics', *Journal of theology for Southern Africa* 91, 3–14.
- Vincent, M.R., 2009, *Vincent's word studies in the New Testament*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.